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Museums, Crisis and Covid-19

Museums and Responding to Crises Post COVID-19: Places of 'Community Healing'

By Philip McDermott, Breda Friel and Roisin Doherty.

Read thoughts on how heritage projects and museums can become central places for commemorating the trauma of Covid-19 and bolster community wellbeing.



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By Philip McDermott (Ulster University), Breda Friel (Ulster University), Roisin Doherty (Derry City and Strabane District Council).

COVID-19 is a crisis that has impacted individual, community, and societal levels. The effect of the illness on citizens and their families and the halt to normal ways of life is likely to have long lasting legacy. Museums may not necessarily be the first place that people, or indeed policymakers, consider in the context of community recovery post-COVID 19.

However, we argue that heritage projects and institutions can become central places for narrating and commemorating the trauma of the disease's impact as well as meeting a community's wellbeing needs. Museums can become places where fundamentally important questions such as COVID's impact on our communities can be represented, interrogated, and reflected upon.

COVID-19 and the Notion of 'Community'

The pandemic has instigated deep reflection on the nature of society and community. Definitions of the term 'community' note that such groups will often share many values and beliefs but are never wholly homogenous. People belonging to a 'community' undeniably build a sense of togetherness around features such as ethnicity or socio-economic status or a geographical location, but they may have very differing views and opinions on other aspects of their lives.

In the past year community cohesiveness has come to be challenged because many opposing views on COVID-19 responses have been articulated. Differences on mask wearing, shielding, social distancing, and 'freedoms' have been points of major contestation and tension. These have often manifested as arguments between neighbours or the breakdown of friendships which had been the bedrock of a local community's sense of togetherness.

Added to this has been the deep sense of grief and trauma for those who lost loved ones or who were seriously ill with the disease and are still suffering its consequences. Moreover, the pandemic has clearly illustrated deep inequalities across the social spectrum.

What role then might museums have in bridging these recent challenges to the 'community'? Longstanding debates from academic literature have noted the role of museums as places of social renewal. The time for this to be put wholeheartedly into action has clearly arrived.

However, can museums adequately address such huge issues alone? We would say not – and working beyond the museum sector is critical for any significant success to emerge. Collaborative working with the NGO/Voluntary sector in Northern Ireland will be critical. This sector has played a major role in social renewal already with a deep understanding of issues around identity, and constantly changing community challenges. Partnerships between museums and community organisations already exists but this needs more formal support from government going forward if the museum's role as a space for post-COVID recovery is to be built upon.

Museums and Crisis: Community Recovery Post COVID-19?

During the pandemic, innovative programming in museums has demonstrated the vitality and

versatility of an engaged, responsive and participatory museum service, proving that museums are already places of relevance even in a crisis.

A crisis can have a sudden impact, arising from an acute or other one-off incident. Crises can also arise from an accumulation of events such as that which we have witnessed through COVID-19. Most people assumed that the pandemic would be a short-term phenomenon. However, the events developed as a chronic issue throughout 2020 often overwhelming the coping mechanisms and capacity of all affected.

A series of recent oral history and documentation projects, responding to COVID-19, reveal the value of museums in the context of the pandemic. For instance, the Tower Museum (Derry/Londonderry), Newry, Mourne and Down District Council, the Irish Linen Centre and Lisburn Museum, have each launched contemporary collecting COVID-19 projects. The rapidity and unexpected impact of the pandemic mean that the real need for reflection and assessment on this period may come in the years ahead and such archives will be vitally important community resources in this process.



Mindfulness session at the Tower Museum, Derry/Londonderry.

'Community Healing' and the Museum

In order to become a space for community healing it is vital that museums collaborate across statutory and third sector community and voluntary settings to expand their contribution to and

knowledge of community wellbeing and resilience. In conclusion to this blog, we posit three initial thoughts which will be important in fulfilling this role.

1) Using Artifacts and Narrative for Healing

This might involve thinking about the ways in which museum and family artifacts can be drawn upon to explore listening and narrative about the pandemic. This process could help museums to explore the various meanings of individual and community trauma recovery whilst also building resilience. Narrative and community-led approaches to such storytelling could provide group support while also enhancing the necessary solidarity in the reinvigoration of communities and people's senses of belonging within them.

2) Museums as Reflective and Supportive Wellbeing Spaces

Silence and reflection in museums offer a form of 'sanctuary space' - a place for safe reflection on what has recently happened. However, this role can perhaps be more strategically considered going forward. Mindful reflection and self-care could be explored in museums using virtual, video and digital guided practice to underpin this role of the 'sanctuary space'. Again, artifacts may underpin this process and reflection.

3) Recognising and Discussing the Role of Museums as Social Justice Settings

This can be achieved with closer working between the heritage sector and community organisations. The knowledge base of both can complement each other's core roles in moving out of the pandemic. While museums have neutral spaces, archival expertise and artifacts, the NGO sector has deep knowledge of the fluid and changing needs of their communities.

There will be many new and emerging challenges, not yet identified, that will arise during post-COVID recovery. A partnership between the community sector and museums may offer opportunities to tackle these issues together. Importantly, for such an agenda to be furthered this requires adequate

resourcing to allow for meaningful partnerships to emerge between museums and the community and voluntary sector at such a critical juncture.
